

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

We are wrapping up our celebration of Christmas. Take a good look at the trees and decorations in church... they won't be here next week. I'm sure at home you will soon be taking down the decorations as well, if you haven't already. With Christmas wrapping up, now is the perfect time for the reading before us today. With this reading, we will take something from Christmas that we can carry with us all year round... and it's something extremely important.

The birth of Jesus is not an isolated incident. It is vitally connected to the distant past, and the future as well.

But let's start in the present. How would you describe your relationship with God right now? Take a quick quiz... on a scale of 1 – 5.

- How strong is your faith? 1 means lots of doubt, on the edge of losing faith altogether. 5 means rock solid, no doubts.
- How confident are you that God loves you? 1 – Not at all. 5 – Certain.
- How frequently are you in God's Word, or thinking about it? 1 – Very rarely. 5 – Frequently throughout the day.
- How frequently do you pray? 1 means not at all. 5 means continuously.
- How joyful are you in the Lord? 1 – Depressed. 5 – Bubbling over.
- How would you rate your anxiety / worried level? 1 – Near panic. 5 – Calm and peaceful.

If you had any numbers that were under 4, you need to listen very carefully to God's Word today. Any number under 4 indicates that in some aspect of your life, you are doubting that God will keep all of his promises. God has said it, but you're not sure he will do it.

Christmas is the season when we can become confident of God's faithfulness in keeping his promises. And if we become confident in that knowledge and can trust it implicitly, it has a profound impact on our lives. Let's look at God's Word.

Here's the setting: the year was roughly 4AD. Israel is not an independent nation, but a conquered nation. They were under Roman rule and oppressed. Now remember, this is Israel, God's chosen nation. How did they become God's chosen nation? Well, about 2,000 years earlier, God spoke to a man named Abraham and made an amazing covenant with him... or promise. To Abraham, at the age of about 75, and his wife, age 65 and beyond child-bearing years. God promised. "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.... A son coming from your own body will be your heir." 5 He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Later God promised that "all the nations of earth" would be blessed through Abraham.

One of the interesting things we notice about God's covenant with Abraham is how it was one-sided. What did God require of Abraham? What was Abraham's side of the deal? Nothing is spoken of. God simply makes a promise.

The common practice of making a covenant in that time was to take a few animals (In Abraham's case: a goat, heifer and ram, along with a dove and a pigeon), and cut them in half from head to tail. The halves were then placed in such a way as to form a path between them. The parties making a covenant with each other would walk the path between the pieces, and in effect say, "If I break the terms of this covenant, so may this be done to me." The animals were then

prepared and eaten as a covenant meal. Both parties would commit themselves to the covenant in this way. But what is interesting in the covenant with Abraham is that only God walked the covenant path between the animals. The Bible says, “**When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch [representing the presence of God] appeared and passed between the pieces.**” No mention is made of Abraham passing between the pieces... only God! God was committing himself to an unconditional promise to Abraham and his descendents.

The promises were repeated and made more specific through the generations. Abraham’s descendents did become numerous. But the child who would be a blessing to all did not come. A Messiah was promised. A descendent of David. A Savior. A Redeemer. Over and over again, God promised he would do it.

Now put yourself in Zechariah’s shoes. Abraham’s descendents are conquered. They are not powerful at all in the world. Even worse, they were spiritually bankrupt. God’s promises were all but forgotten by most. God’s laws were ignored. Temple worship was an afterthought for most. Empty ritualism had crept into the worship life of those who did still consider themselves religious. Even the spiritual leaders were trusting themselves for their salvation, and the promised Messiah for political deliverance and freedom. I wonder if Zechariah sometimes struggled to fulfill his duties in the temple. I wonder if he ever dropped his hands and said, “What’s the point?”

Have you been there in your spiritual life? Are you there now? Well, something made a profound change in Zechariah. And I pray it will make a profound change in you as well.

Zechariah had a son. And God revealed that his son would be the forerunner of the promised Messiah. The promised Christ. Zechariah was excited! Not primarily because God had granted him a son in his old age. That would be enough to make anyone excited! But that’s not at all what Zechariah sings about in this text! Neither does he make his son and his important ministry the primary focus of his song. No, Zechariah sees the big picture. His son was preparing the way for the Life-Changer... the Lord Jesus Christ. The promised Messiah. The one who would bring what was so desperately needed... spiritual deliverance and salvation... the conquering of all our spiritual enemies. God was going to do it.

Now God hadn’t yet done it. But Zechariah knew full well that since his son was the forerunner of Christ, his work was as good as completed. And so his song was spoken of in the past tense... as if Christ had already suffered, died and rose again, accomplishing the salvation God had promised.

Excited, overjoyed, and filled with the Holy Spirit, Zechariah sings this song:

Luke 1:68-75 (NIV)

68 “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people.

69 He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David

70 (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),

71 salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—

72 to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant,

73 the oath he swore to our father Abraham:

74 to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear

75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

Because John was born and the Christ soon would be, Zechariah praised God, because it was proof positive that God is a God who keeps his promises. Because God kept this promise, Zechariah knew God loves us and wants to have a **relationship** with us. It would have been very easy for Zechariah to have been in despair. The people had sinned and wandered from God. The people were ignorant of the true God. Zechariah himself was a sinner who had not trusted God. When an angel announced the birth of his son, Zechariah doubted... and the angel made him

unable to speak until John was born.

With all that sin, Zechariah could very well have thought, “God has left us! And he is right to have done so!”

Have you ever been in similar despair. Maybe because of a sin in your life you’ve wondered, “has God left me? Has he lost patience and moved on?” Maybe because of a tragedy or suffering in your life you’ve thought the same thing. “Has God left me? Is he punishing me? Is his love for me gone?”

But when God kept his promise and sent his Son to be our Savior, God sent the resounding message: “I **do** still love you! I still want you to be near me! So I’m removing your sin and guilt. Here is my Son, born in poverty in a manger who will live among you as my perfect servant and yours. He will die for you. Then you will know my love. Then you will know that I have done everything necessary to draw you near myself. Your sin is forgiven. Your debt is paid. You are rescued from your dangerous situation! You are my child!”

With Zechariah we praise God for he has come and lived among us. He paid the ransom price for us, his people. The descendent of David, Jesus Christ, came, as long foretold by the prophets. He has saved us from our enemies: Satan, the sinful world, and our own sinful flesh. He remembered his promise to save mankind, and no amount of sin, evil, wickedness and rebellion deterred God from keeping his promise.

And that is the joy of Christmas I pray you will carry with you all year round. When Christ the Savior was born, God’s greatest promise was kept. A Savior was born to us, Christ the Lord. There is the proof and evidence that God keeps his promises. The Bible says, “**If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself**” (2 Timothy 2:13).

So, remember the questions at the beginning:

- How strong is your faith? God keeps every promise he makes. That makes faith rock solid.
- How confident are you that God loves you? God keeps his promises. We have full confidence.
- How frequently are you in God’s Word, or thinking about it? God keeps his promises. Let’s get in his Word to know them better and rejoice in them!
- How frequently do you pray? God keep his promises. That means he hears your prayers and answers every one. Why wouldn’t you pray continuously?
- How joyful are you in the Lord? God keeps his promises. We have a joy that surpasses any earthly problems we might face.
- How would you rate your anxiety / worried level? Secure in God’s promises, we have perfect peace.

So put away your Christmas decorations, take down the trees. But take this with you every day during the next year: God keeps his promises. So serve him without fear! Live before him in righteousness and holiness all your days! And have a Merry Christmas all year round. Amen.